

Altering Methods to Fill the English Curriculum Gap in Japan

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Abstract

In the Japanese English education system, a distinct disconnect exists between the elementary and secondary education curricula. Elementary schools across Japan offer English classes, but adjusting to junior high English classes is often difficult for students. While the Japanese government reformed junior high school tests to aid student adjustment, little research exists regarding the most effective method to prepare students before entering junior high school. The purpose of this article is to inform other teachers about necessary elementary school curriculum reforms and how supplementing the current curriculum with more reading and writing helps students adjust. Thus, this article examines the question: How should the Japanese government reform the English curriculum to reduce the gap between the elementary school and junior high school programs? Through the use of narrative self-study, this paper explores how I evolved my teaching practices to include more reading and writing. Comparing reflections on pedagogy in my early career, when I did not utilize increased amounts of reading and writing activities, to pedagogy later in my career when I regularly used these activities, shows how I was better preparing students for the change to the junior high school curriculum.

Keywords: curriculum reform, Japanese education, elementary school English, junior high school, narrative self-study, language learning, teaching practices

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When I first came to Japan to teach English in public schools, I was told elementary school lessons had one goal: allow the students to have fun learning English. The simple reason behind this principle was if students have a good time learning English in elementary school, students will be motivated to learn. Student motivation will then continue on to future studies. At the time, with no experience teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), I believed this reason was as sound as any other for the motivation behind elementary school lesson design. Little did I know just how firmly the mantra of “elementary school English is for fun only” was imprinted on the Japanese elementary school EFL consciousness. My dream of imparting important knowledge to my students, thus preparing myself for becoming an elementary school teacher in my native Canada, was dashed upon the rocks of a system that, in many ways, failed to prepare students for their future by giving a false sense of the what future studies entail.

Early in my teaching career, I learned English education in Japan is highly unregulated at the elementary school level. Despite plans by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to assign a standardized English curriculum, individual cities, municipalities, or schools manage elementary English education (Ikegashira, Matsumoto, & Morita, 2009). The majority of the curriculum design falls upon third-party companies contracted to facilitate English lessons and provide assistant language teachers (ALTs). The result is a high variance in elementary school curriculum quality between cities, even those within close proximity. This variance is most noticeable when students from multiple cities intermingle after entering junior high school.

The lack of elementary school English curriculum standardization often leaves students ill-prepared for the English requirements of the first year of junior high school (Ikegashira et al., 2009; Sakamoto, 2012). One reason for the disconnect between elementary and junior high school English is the move away from conversation-centric and toward grammar-centric education. While the primary focus of elementary school English is memorizing rote phrases under the guise of conversation (Sakamoto, 2012), the junior high school teaching focus shifts to text-based learning in preparation for high school entrance tests (Stewart, 2009). Many students feel shocked by this shift, due to little to no reading or writing experience before entering junior high school.

Considering this shift in focus, the central question of this paper is: How should English language teachers in Japan reform the English curriculum to reduce the curriculum gap between the elementary school and junior high school? Throughout this article, I argue that increasing student exposure to text-based learning in elementary school will ease the transition into junior high school. Reform is necessary despite concerns that English reading and writing is too difficult for Japanese elementary students. Using autobiographical narrative accounts, this paper examines the necessity of these reforms.

Methodology

Narratives and self-study have increasingly gained importance in the field of professional development. Narrative self-study helps facilitate development through understanding how personal experiences shape teacher practices by reflecting on past practices (Bell, 2002; Conle, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington, 2008; Loughran, 2007). Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) maintain reflection is an important usage of narrative practice, as it “situates teachers and teacher educators in the known and the familiar while it asks us to make the known and the familiar strange and open to new possibility” (p. 33). This reflection on past teaching practices provides insight on current teaching practices. Bell (2002) emphasizes that “narrative allows researchers to understand experience,” access “information that people do not consciously know themselves,” and recognize how “one’s understanding of people and events changes” (p. 209).

I engaged in narrative self-study to examine how my teaching journey has influenced my teaching practices, and demonstrate how altering the curriculum could aid other teachers in better preparing students for the future. By examining narrative accounts of curriculum alterations I have made in past teaching practices, I will show how increasing text-based learning better prepared my students for the future. Such an examination is an important element of narrative self-study. Self-reflection and discovery creates the basis of the evidence for curriculum reform, and demonstrates how learning from past practices can inform better professional practices.

Narrative

I intersperse my narrative accounts with relevant theory to ground my accounts within the wider educational knowledge base. I divided the accounts of my teaching experience into five sections, each representing a different stage in my teaching career: junior high school, English language school, high school, elementary school, and back to an English language school.

Junior high and elementary school (September 2006-March 2007)

I first came to Japan in the summer of 2006. Like many first time ALTs, I had no previous teaching experience. In fact, I originally chose to teach in Japan to gain teaching experience. Although part of my contract included the opportunity to receive teacher training, I soon discovered the junior high school “training” consisted of learning where to stand, speaking speed, and how to be a good human tape recorder. My work assignment consisted of a single junior high school and multiple elementary schools in Sawara, a small town in northern Chiba Prefecture. My duties in junior high school primarily involved reading from the textbook with students repeating. Teaching involved playing a few simple games. For the most part, I only spoke when the Japanese English teacher called upon me to speak. Occasionally I would lead a conversation activity; however, the number of such activities were at the Japanese English teacher’s discretion. Teachers often cancelled my lessons in favor of test-focused lessons. Outside of class, I engaged students in daily conversation. As students had few speaking opportunities in class, most students were unable to converse comfortably. In contrast, the elementary school lessons – sometimes numbering as few as seven English classes for the whole year – focused on basic communication skills. The communication focused lessons allowed students to actively participate in the lessons. As I had no experience, I did not seek a means to change the lessons’ structure, despite the fact it became increasingly apparent the teaching goals and the methodology between elementary and junior high school were not linear or connected. Everything I had seen suggested English in Japan was taught in this manner.

TEFL has existed in Japan since the 1800s, yet the majority of Japanese can only use basic English. Despite a positive attitude toward English and the availability of English education from elementary to high school, English proficiency remains limited (Butler, 2007). Unfortunately, there is a need for elementary teachers to teach English with little to no formal instruction in EFL education as no requirement for English language pedagogy in college exists (Machida, 2016; Machida & Walsh, 2015; Ng, 2016). As a result, Japanese elementary teachers may feel anxious about teaching English. New teachers must, within four years, learn practical classroom skills, become certified, and learn the language they will need to teach (Kaplan, Baldauf, & Kamwangamalu, 2011). The language requirement is a stressful addition to teaching duties, especially for Japanese teachers. Japanese society views teachers as highly respected,

well-trained authority figures. Low English ability could tarnish the teacher's authority in the eyes of both students and parents (Machida & Walsh, 2015).

Many cities utilize ALTs hired by private companies to help alleviate the pressure elementary school homeroom teachers face teaching a second language (Machida & Walsh, 2015). The use of ALTs is not without concerns, however (Butler, 2007; Kaplan et al., 2011; Machida & Walsh, 2015). As one teacher interviewed reported, "native ALTs are just ordinary people from English-speaking countries. I think it is difficult for ordinary people to teach 40 students in a foreign school" (Machida & Walsh, 2015, p. 226). This teacher's account is an unfortunate truth, at least in public schools. Private schools can be more discerning in hiring practices. Public schools must take whichever ALTs the company providing teachers for their area hires. Therefore, it is essential elementary teachers receive training in second language learning in order to understand the importance of the four language skills working together. School boards must also use more discerning practices regarding the hiring of ALTs. Unfortunately, dispatch companies often win teaching contracts due to cost, not quality. Meanwhile, in junior high schools, Japanese teachers often lead the class (Kaplan et al., 2011). As a result, ALTs can be underutilized with Japanese teachers reverting to using textbook grammar-translation exercises, which are often the students' least popular form of English instruction (Sakamoto, 2012). Part of this issue is inadequate ALT training, while part is due to the need for test preparation.

By the end of my time working as an ALT, I noticed the majority of the third year students I taught possessed a great deal of knowledge about grammar and could read quite difficult passages, even if they could not always understand the meaning. I thought it remarkable how much students could read and write, given the limited exposure to either skill in elementary school. At most, elementary school students were exposed to the alphabet. I also found my elementary school students, despite fewer lessons, could speak much more confidently. Even within the junior high school, the older students regularly had more difficulty speaking than the younger students. Students appeared to forget communication skills faster than new reading and writing skills were learned.

The rate of forgetting exceeding the rate of learning is a common issue in many programs, not just English (Kaplan et al., 2011). The need to transition from conversation to grammar tests (O'Donnell, 2005; Roux, 2016; Stewart, 2009) results in a reduced number of

conversation lessons in junior high school. Continuing conversation lessons would reinforce what students learned previously, thus lowering the rate of forgetting of conversation skills. The dramatic shift from a predominately conversation methodology to a predominately text-based methodology would be unnecessary if teachers exposed students to text-based learning before entering junior high school.

Junior high education focuses on preparation for high school, rather than communicative competence (O'Donnell, 2005). Regardless of educators' feelings about the validity of teaching methods designed primarily for test preparation, avoiding teaching to tests is difficult for teachers due to government assessment (Roux, 2016) and parental pressure (O'Donnell, 2005). A need for the continuation of these tests to fuel the massive Japanese testing industry exists. Teachers may need to placate students' and parents' insistence on exam preparation (O'Donnell, 2005), as entrance exams are big business. Stewart (2009) states, "institutional testing is a cash cow that must be milked" (p. 11). Reforming something which is so entrenched in the system is difficult.

The practice of teaching to the test appears to be in opposition to the official slogan from MEXT that English ability implies communicative ability (Stewart, 2009). Research suggests coping with globalization, rather than enabling the use of English in daily life, is the real goal of English learning in Japan (Butler, 2007; Hashimoto, 2009; Nakayasu, 2016; Ng, 2016). Government policies promoting TEFL "tend to focus less on the educational needs of individual learners, and more on how TEFL contributes to the nation's economic success and the formation and maintenance of national identity in an era of globalization" (Hashimoto, 2009, p. 23). Hashimoto continues by noting many Japanese regard English as a means to communicate with foreigners or a requirement for entry into higher education. This belief protects Japanese culture, however, believing English serves as a tool limits the domestic expansion of English. Japanese rarely use English to communicate with other Japanese nationals, even when both speakers have a high level of English proficiency.

Junior high students must read and write a great deal, yet English as a foreign language in elementary schools (EFLES) largely ignores these two aspects of English education (Nikolova, 2008). Nikolova speculates that the lack of text-based instruction in EFLES ties to past curricula that focused on text-based learning, but failed to produce people able to speak English. The removal of reading and writing from the elementary curriculum in favor of the near

exclusivity of speaking and listening distances students from one communication medium. A means to acquire text-based skills at a young age would make later reading and writing easier for students. Additionally, neither heavily text-based or heavily conversation-based systems are balanced enough to produce skilled English users.

English conversation school teaching (April 2007-March 2012)

I decided to remain in Japan to continue to pursue teaching, although I no longer wished to work as an ALT. I became frustrated with being unable to really help students due to the lack of a balanced curriculum. Upon the suggestion of a friend, I decided to try teaching at an eikaiwa (English conversation school). Like with most eikaiwa companies, I taught at a number of schools, primarily located in the area around Chiba City. For my first eighteen months, lessons focused primarily on conversations, or more accurately, teaching set questions and responses. Memorizing set phrases helped the students to build confidence; however, I often questioned how much the students were truly learning. Students could repeat a set response to a question, yet often lacked the ability to generate a truly unique response. Elementary students also learned some basic writing, which was little more than generating short words to practice writing the letters. It was not until I began teaching in Narita City, a special English education zone that exposed students to more English, that I began to see the true potential of my elementary school students.

In 2003, Japan introduced many special education zones. The special zones allow flexibility “in the national standard of public school curricula” (Yashiro, 2005, p. 570). Effectively, MEXT granted local governments the oversight necessary to supplement the national curriculum to better fit the needs of local students (Butler & Iino, 2005). In many cities with a high foreign population, such as Narita, the special zones meant an increased number of English lessons for younger students.

At the Narita schools, I began working with a Japanese English teacher named Hiromi. Both of us had a very similar attitude regarding the way our eikaiwa program constricted elementary students. While working with Hiromi, my understanding regarding the shortcomings of English education in Japan grew. While the eikaiwa had a general no homework policy, Hiromi and I were able to use the unique positioning of Narita – and our general dislike for the policy – to start assigning writing assignments to our students. At first, parents were hesitant to accept adding extra work. After all, the whole point of an eikaiwa was to learn how to

communicate, not to write. We were able to impart the importance of writing on parents by pointing out the fourth grade students were already using textbooks to read. Writing was simply a natural progression. The introduction of reading and writing at the Narita schools began to have an obvious effect on the students. Students became more confident while speaking than before the introduction of reading and writing, as building sentences became easier. The increased ease with which students formed sentences was cultivated from the practice received by reading and writing sentences. If Hiromi and I had not altered our practice to begin to introduce writing, our students would not have made the progression so easily. Once a few parents in each class began to see positive results, the more resistant parents began requesting more homework than we had originally assigned. The Narita schools showed me elementary school students were perfectly capable of learning to read and write in English. Holding students back did not help. Holding back students made only the parents feel comfortable. This realization was something I would take forward into future work.

The psychological barrier regarding English some Japanese possess is one of the difficulties Japanese English education faces. Parents and teachers can create language barriers in students' minds by making the material appear to be too difficult (Nikolova, 2008). This attitude in adults fosters the same attitude in students. A possible reason for the negative attitude is past failures to produce students capable of using English by utilizing text-based curricula (Nikolova, 2008). Reducing exposure to text-based learning widens the gap between elementary and junior high school students, as students must be exposed to reading and writing to succeed in mandated testing. Shielding elementary students from reading and writing because of the perceived difficulty level makes learning these skills more difficult in junior high school, as students must learn advanced reading and writing skills in a relatively short amount of time.

High school teaching (April 2012-March 2013)

Following my time in the eikaiwa, I returned to teaching as an ALT in high schools around eastern Chiba Prefecture. During this time, I noticed students primarily focused on studying for post-secondary education entrance exams. Classes focused on grammar, reading, and writing, as I was the only dedicated conversation teacher. As a result, I did not have classes with many students. At one school, for example, I only had classes with second year students. Students in these classes had very low levels of motivation for conversation. Classes would often be changed or cancelled in favor of grammar-focused lessons conducted by the Japanese

English teachers. While exceptions existed, the majority of students had only basic communication skills, despite having studied English for a minimum of three to five years.

Potentially the greatest problem with English education in Japan lies with tailoring teaching to entrance exam requirements. Teaching to entrance exams results in students in junior high school studying advanced grammar points shortly after learning the alphabet (Ikegashira et al., 2009). Japanese society widely accepts students' low proficiency as normal (Nakayasu, 2016). English is not an actual subject in elementary school, with the Period of Integrated Studies often used for EFLES (Nakayasu, 2016; Ng, 2016; Nikolova, 2008; Uematsu, 2012). The switch from taking English lessons lacking official course status to taking lessons taught predominately for test preparation requires students to adapt their learning strategies. These strategies may be underdeveloped for second language learning due to the curriculum ignoring the strategies at a young age (Yabukoshi & Takeuchi, 2009). Teaching to the test utilizes more grammar-translation, resulting in students being unable to use skills learned in elementary school, rendering elementary English learning obsolete. Reforms of social traditions are difficult in Japan, especially when dealing with students' educational future. "As English teachers they accept that preparing students for these tests must take precedence over reform measures, which might jeopardize students' test results" (O'Donnell, 2005, p. 314).

Elementary school teaching (April 2013-March 2016)

In April 2013, I began teaching for a non-profit organization based in Kashima City, Ibaraki Prefecture. Similar to Narita City, Kashima was also declared a special education zone for English. The city could choose a unique English curriculum, provided the curriculum encompassed MEXT's guidelines. Working in Kashima, I received the first instance of real training while working in Japanese public schools. Training consisted of both how to teach and the theory behind why activities were conducted using a specified method. While the primary focus of the lessons was to increase students' communicative abilities, the Kashima curriculum provided far more opportunities to read and write with the exact amount of text-based activities left to the discretion of the teacher. Text-based learning was particularly prevalent in the fifth and sixth grades. Phonics started in the third grade, writing the alphabet in the fourth, sight-reading in the fifth, and writing in the sixth. Throughout the various grades, teachers were encouraged to write sentences on the blackboard so students could begin to associate phonics with reading. This practice was used to prepare students for reading as they grew older. While not the primary

focus of any particular lesson, this opportunity allowed students to begin to experience reading and writing in the years just before entering junior high school. I increased the amount I wrote on the blackboard and soon students in the third or fourth grade used what was written to help generate spoken English. These students used the words as hints for speaking activities.

Despite the students' speaking and listening proficiency, there was still a sizeable gap in the material the students learned in elementary school and what teachers taught in junior high school. I introduced roleplays written in English to increase students' reading, as well as self and peer-introductions to increase the volume of student writing. These activities gave students significant exposure to reading and writing that would have been missing had I not expanded on the provided curriculum.

Through a survey of elementary school teachers, Roux (2016) found the majority of teachers believed the purpose of English as a foreign language in elementary school (EFLES) is to increase students' interest in English. Only 35% of teachers felt the purpose of studying English was for basic education. This issue is made worse through different interpretations of MEXT's guidelines by local governments.

English education at the elementary school is doomed to fail because there is a lack of clearly defined focus and specific learning outcomes in the elementary school English curriculum... In addition, there is little cooperation between schools to create a cohesive school syllabus to bridge the gap between elementary and junior high school English syllabi. At the moment, both elementary and junior high schools have fundamentally different English syllabi. (Ng, 2016, pp. 221–222)

One reason for the curriculum imbalance is the fact elementary school English is determined by local governments based on guidelines, not mandates, from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). MEXT has gradually increased the amount of elementary school English learning, starting in 2000 (Ng, 2016). English became a compulsory subject for fifth and sixth grades in 2006, yet lacks academic subject status. Students receive no formal English feedback or grade (Butler, 2007). MEXT completed the implementation of fifth and sixth-grade reforms in 2011 (Ng, 2016), yet evidence of the benefits of these reforms remains mixed.

Traditionally, the elementary school English goal has been basic communication (Butler, 2007). Roux (2016) argued EFLES can help build a strong foundation of communication skills students can utilize when entering junior high school. Using Step Eiken test interview results, Uematsu (2012) found EFLES students had a higher proficiency level in speaking than non-EFLES students. Uematsu (2012) suggested EFLES can help develop communication skills, provided communication remains a focus in junior high school. Katsuyama, Nishigaki, and Wang (2008) reference four studies that found obvious benefits for junior high school students after EFLES, specifically in listening and the ability to respond to questions. Unfortunately, much of the junior high school lesson focus shifts from communication skills to more grammar-focused structures. Student motivation in junior high school was also higher after EFLES (Katsuyama et al., 2008). High junior high students' motivation is essential due to differences in teaching goals between elementary and junior high school. A lack of motivation in these students makes the adjustment to junior high school even more challenging.

Other studies suggest a drop in student motivation from elementary to junior high (Ng, 2016; Sakamoto, 2012). “[T]he English language teaching in junior high schools quickly transforms into a grammar-oriented, translation-based approach that is remote from the English teaching widely practiced in elementary school” (Sakamoto, 2012, p. 414). The change in teaching styles is partially due to many Asian learners of English favoring memorization and reading (Yabukoshi & Takeuchi, 2009). Both strategies are far removed from the speaking games, roleplays, and songs dominating EFLES curricula. While these activities create enjoyment for younger learners, overuse produces a false impression of future English study. Carreira (2006) suggests older students tend to enjoy these activities less than younger students. The false impression of post-elementary English learning coupled with a declining interest in English due to childish activities can negatively affect motivation in junior high school. Curriculum balance, such as I attempted to implement, is needed to push older students while still conforming to MEXT's guidelines.

English conversation school, a second time around (April 2016-March 2017)

An unfortunate reality of the quality program used in Kashima City was the increased cost. In 2016, the Kashima City Board of Education chose to discontinue the existing English program in favor of a cheaper option more closely following the programs instituted in the majority of Japan. I continued to work for the non-profit organization's eikaiwa using a

curriculum similar to the elementary schools' curriculum. Here, once I began to teach both elementary and junior high school students, I came to appreciate the need for increased reading and writing in the elementary schools. Students began writing in the first grade and wrote sentences by the third grade. At first, writing consisted of copying sentences from a workbook, but eventually evolved into independent writing of the students' choice. Students used the latter writing exercises to reinforce classroom speaking activities. Reading began in the third grade, although students who had studied longer started reading at an even younger age.

I could see the eikaiwa students were able to adapt to the first year of junior high school thanks to the increased exposure to reading and writing through the eikaiwa curriculum. The increased exposure built student confidence while in elementary school. The confidence shown by the eikaiwa students was much higher compared to the confidence demonstrated by the students at the beginning of my teaching career in Japan. This confidence resulted in increased motivation to learn. The first year junior high students were able to produce weekly journals on a variety of topics after becoming familiar with writing in elementary school through the eikaiwa curriculum. Students were more confident in their coursework and often counted English among their strongest subjects in school. While one could argue part of the success was self-motivation to learn English, motivation without exposure and opportunity does not result in success.

Teaching reading and writing is considered unnecessary in elementary school English classes (Machida, 2016) due to the belief that reading and writing is too difficult for elementary-aged students. Unfortunately, early EFL learners require “massive text input since they have limited chances of L2 interactions outside the classroom boundaries” (Ahmed & Rajab, 2015). While the difficulty level may be a concern for administrators, 62.7% of Japanese elementary students surveyed listed reading English as a reason they want to study English in the future (Nikolova, 2008). Providing text-based instruction, despite the difficulty, would not necessarily result in decreased motivation. In fact, students may seek the challenge. I am reminded of one of our elementary students who, in our school's speech contest listed math as her favorite subject because of the difficulty. For her, the challenge made math fun. Children, especially young children, seek challenges and can become bored if the presented material is too simple.

Discussion

Reflecting on my teaching experiences changed the way I have come to see myself as a teacher and has afforded a better understanding of how my teaching practices evolved. Upon first

arriving in Japan, I felt my role as an actual teacher was secondary to ensuring students were entertained with the lesson. This misconception made grasping how to prepare students for the next level of education more difficult. There is no doubt elementary school students lack the necessary preparation for entering junior high school (Butler, 2007; O'Donnell, 2005; Sakamoto, 2012), yet I feel confident the changes I made to my teaching practices through pushing the boundaries of what was "allowed" aided my students' preparation.

This narrative journey along my years as a teacher has helped show how much of my teaching practice has been shaped by student interactions. Students are often capable of learning material designated by the administration as too difficult. My elementary students have always enjoyed a great sense of accomplishment after reading or writing something they struggled to read or write when lessons started. My students in more recent years are much better prepared for junior high school because of the changes to my teaching practices to include more reading and writing. Reading and writing are two vital components to the junior high school curriculum and reducing exposure to these components harmed students in the past.

Unfortunately, as Bell (2002) notes, it is "unlikely that conservative stakeholders, such as school boards, will easily embrace insights drawn from [narrative inquiries]" (p. 211). Instead, is my hope that new educators in the EFL field in Japan and other countries with similar policies will be able to see the importance of text-based instruction for elementary school students. Ideally, the hodgepodge of language programs present in Japan will begin to accept that overreliance on songs and memorization of phrases leads to inadequate preparation of elementary students. Both students and teachers need a better understanding of what is necessary at the elementary level to prepare students for junior high school. Teachers must be willing to question conventional policy in Japan and deliver material required by the students, rather than exclusively focussing on making the lessons fun.

Conclusion

In this paper I use a narrative self-study approach to reflect upon how my teaching practice has evolved as I developed a better understanding of Japanese elementary students' needs. This reflection has helped me see how to best serve my students' future needs, and how difficult adequately preparing students can be when the elementary school curriculum lacks relevant links to junior high school needs, specifically in the area of reading and writing. I hope my experiences demonstrate the importance of shifting the belief that English for elementary

school students should only focus on students having fun. I agree that an entertaining lesson is important for young students; however, lessons also require substance to be effective. The material covered over the course of the year should take into account what students will need to know in later studies. I hope that my reflection will inspire other English teachers to examine their practices to see how to serve students better. As I have shown, students need to be exposed to reading and writing at an earlier age, as the students are perfectly capable of excelling when offered reading and writing assignments.

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